



Mengzi (Mencius) c. 371-289 B.C.E.

## Mengzi

Mengzi, or Mencius as he was first known in the West, was one of the great teachers of ancient China, second only to that of Confucius in the Confucian tradition. Mencius developed Confucianism by defending it against the criticisms of the Mohists as well as the proto-Daoists teachings of Yang Zhu. Mencius is best known for developing an optimistic theory of human nature, which holds that human beings are capable of benevolence. The question concerning human nature was not even a concern in the time of Confucius. It was Yang Zhu who introduced the notion of human nature (*xing*), but it was primarily the result of Mencius' response to Yang Zhu on the topic of human nature that the question of human nature becomes a central theme of subsequent Chinese philosophy. In a famous passage defending the claim of the innate goodness of human beings, Mencius claims that the human heart contains the sprouts or germs of the four central Confucian virtues of benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), propriety (*li*), and wisdom (*zhi*). These sprouts need to be nourished, however, and this nourishment of the sprouts of the virtues of the *junzi* become the focus of Mencius' development of Confucianism. What follows here are excerpts from the Introduction to the *Mencius* in the translation by D.C. Lau as well as a few selections from Lau's translation.

Only two Chinese philosophers have the distinction of being known consistently to the West by a latinized name. The first is Confucius. The second is Mencius, whose name is Meng K'e. That Mencius should share the distinction is by no means an insignificant fact, for he is without doubt second only to Confucius in importance in the Confucian tradition, a fact officially recognized in China for over a thousand years. There are various reasons for this. First, the *Analects of Confucius* which forms almost the only reliable source of our knowledge of the thought of Confucius consists of a collection of sayings of the sage, mostly brief and often with little or no context. Hence many ideas are not elaborated upon, leaving a good deal of room for differences in interpretation. The *Mencius*, too, consists of sayings of Mencius and conversations he had with his contemporaries, but these tend to be of greater length and there is often some kind of a context. The ideas are, therefore, more articulate. Thus the *Mencius*, when read side by side with the *Analects of Confucius*, throws a great deal of light on the latter work. Second, Mencius developed some of the ideas of Confucius and at the same time discussed problems not touched on by Confucius. It is not an exaggeration to say that what is called Confucianism in subsequent times contains as much of the thought of Mencius as of Confucius.

The only other great name in early Confucianism is that of Hsün Tzu who was half a century or so later than Mencius. He developed Confucianism in a way radically different from that of Mencius, and we shall have occasion to mention him when we come to discuss the philosophical thought of Mencius. It is perhaps futile to try to decide which of the two was the greater thinker, as the difference between them is due mainly to a difference in philosophical temperament. In William James' famous distinction, Mencius is a 'tender-minded', and Hsün Tzu a 'tough-minded', philosopher. But Hsün Tzu had considerably less influence on subsequent thought than Mencius, and this for two reasons. First, Mencius was probably the greatest writer amongst ancient philosophers, while Hsün Tzu was, at best, the possessor of an indifferent literary style. When in T'ang times Han Yü raised the banner of the *ku wen* movement,<sup>1</sup> he looked to Mencius as much for his superb style as for his sound philosophy. Second, from

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<sup>1</sup> The movement was so called because it advocated a return to *ku wen*, i.e. the prose style of the ancient period. This came about through a growing dissatisfaction with the parallel prose that had been prevalent since the Six Dynasties.

the Sung onwards, the philosophy of Mencius became the orthodoxy while Hsün Tzu was almost totally eclipsed. The *Great Learning*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Analects of Confucius*, together with the *Mencius*, became known as the *Four Books* which, until the present century, were read and memorized by every schoolboy in his first years at school. Thus the position and influence of Mencius were assured.

## Selections from the *Mencius*

### Defending the Claim of Innate Benevolence

Mencius said, ‘No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others. Such a sensitive heart was possessed by the Former Kings and this manifested itself in compassionate government. With such a sensitive heart behind compassionate government, it was as easy to rule the Empire as rolling it on your palm.

‘My reason for saying that no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others is this. Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child. From this it can be seen that whoever is devoid of the heart of shame is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of courtesy and modesty is not human, and whoever is devoid of the heart of right and wrong is not human. The heart of compassion is the germ of benevolence (*ren*); the heart of shame, of dutifulness (*yi*), the heart of courtesy and modesty, of observance of the rites (*li*); the heart of right and wrong, of wisdom (*zhi*). Man has these four germs just as he has four limbs. For a man possessing these four germs to deny his own potentialities is for him to cripple his prince. If a man is able to develop all these four germs that he possesses, it will be like a fire starting up or a spring coming through. When these are fully developed, he can take under his protection the whole realm within the Four Seas, but if he fails to develop them, he will not be able even to serve his parents.’ (II, A.6)

When the administration of the state of Cheng was in his hands, Tzu-ch’an used his own carriage to take people across the Chen and the Wei.

‘He was a generous man,’ commented Mencius, ‘but he did not know how to govern. If the footbridges are built by the eleventh month and the carriage bridge by the twelfth month every year, the people will not suffer the hardship of fording. A gentleman (*junzi*), when he governs properly, can clear his path of people when he goes out. How can he find the time to take each man across the river? Hence if a man in authority has to please every one separately, he will not find the day long enough.’ (IV, B.2)

King Hsüan of Ch’i asked, ‘Can you tell me about the history of Duke Huan of Ch’i and Duke Wen of Chin?’

‘None of the followers of Confucius,’ answered Mencius, ‘spoke of the history of Duke Huan and Duke Wen. It is for this reason that no one in after ages passed on any accounts, and I have no knowledge of them. If you insist, perhaps I may be permitted to tell you about becoming a true King.’

‘How virtuous must a man be before he can become a true King?’

‘He becomes a true King, by bringing peace to the people. This is something no one can stop.’

‘Can someone like myself bring peace to the people?’

‘Yes.’

‘How do you know that I can?’

‘I heard the following from Hu He:

The King was sitting in the upper part of the hall and someone led an ox through the lower part. The King noticed this and said, “Where is the ox going?” “The blood of the ox is to be used for consecrating a new bell.” “Spare it. I cannot bear to see it shrinking with fear, like an innocent man going to the place of execution.” “In that case, should the ceremony be abandoned?” “That is out of the question. Use a lamb instead.”

‘I wonder if this is true?’

‘It is.’

‘The heart behind your action is sufficient to enable you to become a true King. The people all thought that you grudged the expense, but, for my part, I have no doubt that you were moved by pity for the animal.’

‘You are right,’ said the King. ‘How could there be such people? Ch’i may be a small state, but I am not quite so miserly as to grudge the use of an ox. It was simply because I could not bear to see it shrink with fear, like an innocent man going to the place of execution, that I used a lamb instead.’

‘You must not be surprised that the people thought you miserly. You used a small animal in place of a big one. How were they to know? If you were pained by the animal going innocently to its death, what was there to choose between an ox and a lamb?’

The King laughed and said, ‘What was really in my mind, I wonder? It is not true that I grudged the expense, but I *did* use a lamb instead of the ox. I suppose it was only natural that the people should have thought me miserly.’

‘There is no harm in this. It is the way of a benevolent man. You saw the ox but not the lamb. The attitude of a gentleman towards animals is this: once having seen them alive, he cannot bear to see them die, and once having heard the cry, he cannot bear to eat their flesh. That is why the gentleman keeps his distance from the kitchen.’

The King said, ‘The *Book of Odes* says,

The heart is another man’s,  
But it is I who have surmised it.

This describes you perfectly. For though the deed was mine, when I looked into myself I failed to understand my own heart. You described it for me and your words struck a chord in me. What made you think that my heart accorded with the way of a true King?’

‘Should someone say to you, “I am strong enough to lift a hundred *chin* but not a feather; I have eyes that can see the tip of a fine hair but not a cartload of firewood,” would you accept the truth of such a statement?’

‘No.’

‘Why should it be different in your own case? Your bounty is sufficient to reach the animals, yet the benefits of your government fail to reach the people. That a feather is not lifted is because one fails to make the effort; that a cartload of firewood is not seen is because one fails to use one’s eyes. Similarly, that peace is not brought to the people is because you fail to practice kindness. Hence your failure to become a true King is due to a refusal to act, not an inability to act. [. . .]’ (I, A.7)

### **On human nature**

Kao Tzu said, ‘Human nature is like the *ch’i* willow. Dutifulness is like cups and bowls. To make morality out of human nature is like making cups and bowls out of the willow.’

‘Can you, said Mencius, ‘make cups and bowls by following the nature of the willow? Or must you mutilate the willow before you can make it into cups and bowls, must you, then, also mutilate a man to make him moral? Surely it will be these words of yours men in the world will follow in bringing disaster

upon morality.’ (VI, A.1)

Mencius said, ‘For a man to give full realization to his heart is for him to understand his own nature, and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven. By retaining his heart and nurturing his nature he is serving Heaven. Whether he is going to die young or to live to a ripe old age makes no difference to his steadfastness of purpose. It is through awaiting whatever is to befall him with a perfected character that he stands firm on his proper destiny.’ (VII, A.1)

### Explaining Failures to Behave Benevolently

Mencius said, ‘Is the maker of arrows really more unfeeling than the maker of armour? He is afraid lest he should fail to harm people, whereas the maker of armour is afraid lest he should fail to protect them. The case is similar with the sorcerer-doctor and the coffin-maker. For this reason one cannot be too careful in the choice of one’s calling.

Confucius said, “The best neighborhood is where benevolence (*ren*) is to be found. Not to live in such a neighborhood when one has the choice cannot by any means be considered wise.” Benevolence is the high honour bestowed by Heaven and the peaceful abode of man. Not to be benevolent when nothing stands in the way is to show a lack of wisdom. A man neither benevolent nor wise, devoid of courtesy and dutifulness, is a slave. A slave ashamed of serving is like a maker of bows ashamed of making bows, or a maker of arrows ashamed of making arrows. If one is ashamed, there is no better remedy than to practice benevolence. Benevolence is like archery: an archer makes sure his stance is correct before letting fly the arrow, and if he fails to hit the mark, he does not hold it against his victor. He simply seeks the cause within himself.’ (II, A.7)

Mencius said to Tai Pu-sheng, ‘Do you wish your King to be good? I shall speak to you plainly. Suppose a Counsellor of Ch’u wished his son to speak the language of Ch’i. Would he have a man from Ch’i to tutor his son? Or would he have a man from Ch’u?’

‘He would have a man from Ch’i to tutor his son.’

‘With one man from Ch’i tutoring the boy and a host of Ch’u men chattering around him, even though you caned him every day to make him speak Ch’i, you would not succeed. Take him away to some district like Chuang and Yueh for a few years, then even if you caned him every day to make him speak Ch’u, you would not succeed. You have placed Hsueh Chu-chou near the King because you think him a good man. If everyone around the King, old or young, high or low, is a Hsueh Chu-chou, then who will help the King to do evil? But if no one around the King is a Hsueh Chu-chou, then who will help the King to do good? What difference can one Hsueh Chu-chou make to the King of Sung?’ (III, A.6)

Mencius said, ‘Slight is the difference between man and the brutes. The common man loses this distinguishing feature, while the gentleman retains it. Shun understood the way of things and had a keen insight into human relationships. He followed the path of morality. He did not just put morality into practice.’ (IV, B.19)

Mencius said, ‘In good years the young men are mostly lazy, while in bad years they are mostly violent. Heaven has not sent down men whose endowment differs so greatly. The difference is due to what ensnares their hearts. Take the barely for example. Sow the seeds and cover them with soil. The place is the same and the time of the sowing is also the same. The plants shoot up and by the summer solstice they all ripen. If there is any unevenness, it is because the soil varies in richness and there is no uniformity in the fall of rain and dew and the amount of human effort devoted to tending it. Now things of the same kind are all alike. Why should we have doubts when it comes to man. [. . .] Should hearts prove to be an exception by possessing nothing in common? What is common to all hearts? Reason and

rightness. The sage is simply the man first to discover this common element in my heart. [. . .] (VI, A.7)

Mencius said, ‘The multitude can be said never to understand what they practice, to notice what they repeatedly do, or to be aware of the path they follow all their lives.’ (VII, A.5)

### **Extending Benevolence**

[. . .] Hence I said Kao Tzu never understood rightness because he looked upon it as external. You must work at it and never let it out of your mind, you must not forcibly help it grow either. You must not be like the man from Sung. There was a man from Sung who pulled at his rice plants because he was worried about their failure to grow. Having done so, he went on his way home, not realizing what he had done. “I am worn out today,” said he to his family. “I have been helping the rice plants to grow.” His son rushed out to take a look and there the plants were, all shriveled up. There are few in the world who can resist the urge to help their rice plants grow. There are some who leave the plants unattended, thinking that nothing they can do will be of any use. They are the people who do not even bother to weed. There are others who help the plants grow. They are the people who pull at them. Not only do they fail to help them but they do the plants positive harm. [. . .]’ (II, A.2)

Mencius said, ‘For every man there are things he cannot bear. To extend this to what he can bear is benevolence. For every man there are things he is not willing to do. To extend this to what he is willing to do is rightness. If a man can extend to the full his natural aversion to harming others, then there will be an overabundance of benevolence. [. . .]’ (VII, B.31)

### **Refinement**

Mencius said, ‘A gentleman differs from other men in that he retains his heart. A gentleman retains his heart by means of benevolence and the rites. The benevolent man loves others, and the courteous man respects others. He who loves others is always loved by them; he who respects others is always respected by them. Suppose a man treats one in an outrageous manner. Faced with this, a gentleman will say to himself, “I must be lacking in benevolence and courtesy, or how could such a thing happen to me.” When looking into himself, he finds that he has been benevolent and courteous, and yet this outrageous treatment continues, then the gentleman will say to himself, “I must have failed to do my best for him.” [. . .] (IV, B.28)

Mencius said, ‘Benevolent words do not have as profound an effect on the people as benevolent music. Good government does not win the people as does good education. He who practices good government is feared by the people; he who gives the people good education is loved by them. Good government wins the wealth of the people; good education wins their hearts.’ (VII, A.14)

Mencius said, ‘If others do not respond to your love with love, look into your own benevolence; if others fail to respond to your attempts to govern them with order, look into your own wisdom; if others do not return your courtesy, look into your own respect. In other words, look into yourself whenever you fail to achieve your purpose. (IV, A.4)

Mencius said, ‘You can never succeed in winning the allegiance of men by trying to dominate them through goodness. You can only succeed by using this goodness for their welfare. You can never gain the Empire without heart-felt admiration of the people in it.’ (IV, B.16)

Mencius said, ‘A man must not be without shame, for the shame of being without shame is shamelessness indeed.’ (VII, A.6)

Mencius said, ‘Great is the use of shame to man. He who indulges in craftiness has no use for shame. If a man is not ashamed of being inferior to other men, how will he ever become their equal?’ (VII, A.7)

Mencius said, ‘A gentleman steeps himself in the Way because he wishes to find it in himself. When he finds it in himself, he will be at ease in it; when he is at ease in it, he can draw deeply upon it; when he can draw deeply upon it, he finds its source wherever he turns. That is why a gentleman wishes to find the Way in himself.’ (IV, B.14)

### **Fulfillment**

[. . .] That which a gentleman follows as his nature, that is to say, benevolence, rightness, the rights and wisdom, is rooted in his heart, and manifests itself in his face, giving it a sleek appearance. It also shows in his back and extends to his limbs, rendering their message intelligible without words. (VII, A.21)

[. . .] ‘If a man is praised for honesty in his village,’ said Wan Tzu, ‘then he is an honest man wherever he goes. Why did Confucius consider such a man an enemy of virtue?’

‘If you want to censure him, you cannot find anything; if you want to find fault with him, you cannot find anything either. He shares with others the practices of the day and is in harmony with the sordid world. He pursues such a policy and appears to be conscientious and faithful, and to show integrity in his conduct. He is liked by the multitude and is self-righteous. It is impossible to embark on the way of Yao and Shun with such a man. Hence the name “enemy of virtue”. Confucius said, “I dislike what is specious. I dislike weeds for fear they might be confused with the rice plant; I dislike flattery for fear it might be confused with what is right; I dislike glibness for fear it might be confused with the truthful; I dislike the music of Cheng for fear it might be confused with proper music; I dislike purple for fear it might be confused with vermilion; I dislike the village honest man for fear he might be confused with the virtuous.” (VII, B.37)

Mencius said, ‘A man who is out to make a name for himself will be able to give away a state of a thousand chariots, but reluctance will be written all over his face if he had to give away a basketful of rice and a bowlful of soup when no such purpose was served.’ (VII, B.11)

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